REVIEWS

Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998) xxi + 753 pp., ill.

For students of seventeenth-century history and literature, Adrian Johns's *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* will likely become the definitive account of publishing for the period. We know much about printing practices in the age of Shakespeare; over fifty years of textual scholarship begun by W. W. Greg and Fredson Bowers and continued by the many present editors of Shakespeare's plays have provided a thorough account of the production of texts in the early 1600s. But Johns has now told us how the rest of the seventeenth century plays out in English print- and bookshops, focusing especially on the publication of the work of scientists, from the early enterprises led by Tycho Brahe and Galileo on the Continent to the Royal Society projects that involved Hooke, Newton, and Halley in England. Johns organizes his chapters around various conflicts among these personalities, giving an engaging human context to the advances in knowledge that took place in science's formative years.

In addition to recounting the great dramas that surrounded the discoveries of the scientific revolution, Johns provides an invaluable topography of printers and booksellers in London. Scholars such as Peter Blayney have described the arrangement of bookstalls around limited areas, such as St. Paul's Churchyard, but Johns maps out how the book trade operated in various neighborhoods throughout London. St. Paul's was, of course, the center of distribution for the most reputable publications (such as results from Royal Society experiments); but if one wanted to read the meditations of a Quaker or other illicit books, outlying districts such as Little Britain or Moorfields were the places to go. Johns also offers a clear, thorough explanation of that ambiguous occupation of "stationer." Sometimes printers and sometimes booksellers, stationers met in a hall constructed on the model of a castle, a design that mirrored the strength and secretiveness of their guild. Johns combines a study of architecture, urban planning, and bureaucratic licensing to trace the all-important work of this printing institution.

Besides single-handedly establishing a history of seventeenth-century printing, Johns argues a thesis of considerable interest to the general reader. Elizabeth Eisenstein's influential *The Printing Press As an*

Agent of Change (1979) established the idea of typographical fixity, that is, the apparent standardization of texts that followed the invention of the printing press. The fact that authors such as Erasmus prefaced editions of their works with a list of "errata," Eisenstein argued, indicates that a certain amount of consistency from book to book had taken place by the early sixteenth century. Try imagining such a list attached to a scribal manuscript; the idea is ridiculous. Much of Johns's book is concerned with disproving Eisenstein's idea of fixity; in his focus on the seventeenth century, Johns stresses that by 1700 typographical standardization is still by no means the *fait accompli* Eisenstein imagined for the early 1500s.

Offering a "taxonomy of piracy," Johns shows how discoveries by Brahe, Galileo, Robert Hooke, John Flamsteed, and Newton did not benefit from a stable publishing network. Although key dates in science such as 1543, 1610, and 1687 do correspond to the publishing of seminal works (Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus*, Galileo's *Sidereus Nuncius*, and Newton's *Principia*, respectively), each of these texts fought an uphill battle and won not because of the publishing process but in spite of it. Galileo's diagrams of the moon were quickly (and sloppily) copied by rogue publishers and circulated throughout Europe, making it all but impossible during the remainder of the century to find a reliable edition of the text. The pages of the *Principia* were printed alongside titles such as *Sodom, or the Quintessence of Debauchery* and *The School of Venus, or ... Ladies delight reduced into rules of practise*; that Newton's text did appear in a successful edition owed much to his vigilance over a printer who was more interested in pirated almanacs and pornography than in cutting-edge scholarship. For scientists not as devoted to seeing their works through the publication process, the results were often disastrous.

Johns performs a demolition job on the idea of print fixity in the seventeenth century, so our next question is, naturally, when *did* it begin? Johns hints at several events that would provide a date—the invention of copyright in the early eighteenth century, the invention of the steam press and mass production of texts in the early nineteenth—but the question never receives a satisfactory answer. One hesitates to say more should be added to a book of 750 pages, but we are held in suspense on this point for much of Johns's narrative, and in the end it feels a bit like an unsolved mystery novel.

Part of Johns's final vagueness on this issue perhaps results from his sense that "typographical fixity" never really exists in any period. He

does refer to the fixity of print in the contemporary world in order to highlight its absence in the early modern, but his thinking is permeated by a sense of print's inherent volatility. Fixity, if and when it does occur, results from a delicate process that is never dependent on technology, but on agreements between persons. Perhaps the collaborative nature of bookmaking explains his somewhat puzzling habit of referring to his own argument in the third person: his sentences begin not, "I maintain," or "I claim," but "*The Nature of the Book* asserts," "*The Nature of the Book* points to," etc. These eccentric formulations may result from Johns's reading of recent textual theorists such as Jerome McGann and Peter Stallybrass, who question authorial autonomy and insist on the social rather than the private origins of texts. The "nature" of books is that they are what we bring to them: like contracts, they require negotiations between reader and writer and are never fixed.

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